

**I.R. Willison's response to the presentation of his Festschrift, University of London IES/SAS, in the Keith Hancock Room, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, October 2<sup>nd</sup> 2007**

Dean and Directors of the School of Advanced Study [SAS], Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am most grateful to Professor Gould of the Institute of English Studies [IES] for his kind introduction and in particular to my friends for their contributions to this handsome book.

There is good stuff in it. I am pleased. I am very pleased. And I thank you all for coming.

I

It is highly appropriate that a collection entitled 'The Commonwealth of Books', and including contributors and topics from Australia, New Zealand, India, and Canada as well as Britain, should be launched in the Menzies and Hancock rooms of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies. Sir Keith Hancock was the founding Director of the Institute (in 1949) and is still regarded, by the present generation of imperial historians as 'far and away the greatest historian of the Empire and Commonwealth'.

However, a new imperial history is expanding to include what William St Clair [St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*] has called [p 422] 'a great world-wide cultural empire, more extensive in its reach even than the political and commercial' empire of Hancock's life interest. In particular it involves the book and media trades and also the United States as key players. In brief, the history of the book plays its role in the new imperial history mainly through publishers' perennial competition for market-share in cultural empires that are essentially text and reader based, involving the massive exploitation of reprints, whether authorised or not (famously Scott and Dickens, let alone the Bible).

In this competition the American push has been irresistible, from the Harper Brothers in the 1820s to (shall we say) the Harper Collins and News International of Rupert Murdoch. Moreover, what has been called the 'culture of reprinting' [M.L.McGill, *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting*], including anthologies and textbooks, is now seen as an

essential, active factor in mainline American, Canadian and other cultural histories. For example, in the United States reprinting 'represent[ed] the Jacksonian form of national culture' [McGill, p 108]. This was in some ways a more culturally substantial revolution than that of 1776, and was echoed in Canada by William Lyon Mackenzie, and even in Australia, perhaps, by John Dunmore Lang. In short without adducing these, and similar book-history complexes, the dynamics of cultural history cannot be fully understood.

So we now identify a steadily broadening range of book-history complexes from, at the microcosmic level, individual textual biography (represented in the Festschrift by Warwick Gould's case-study of William Butler Yeats and his publishers); then, the 'generation of [whole] literary genres [by] the making of books' (classically the novel - Paul Hunter in the Festschrift) and the structuring of violent politico-religious controversy by print culture (Michael Suarez); to the role of the publishing of grammars, glossaries etc, in the construction of the various professional discourses (doctors, architects and especially that of lawyers) and indeed of the discourse of civil life as a whole (in the Festschrift, Robin Alston the copyright of whose pioneering, twenty-plus-volume of the *Bibliography of the English Language to 1800* is now owned by our Institute, providing a base for adventurous research in the history of law etc). Even broader still, within English studies we have the inclusive *Reading Experience Database 1450-1945* (envisaged by Simon Eliot when at the Open University); then, integrating book history with cultural history at large, we have *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain* associated with projects for Wales, Scotland and Ireland. For the final, post-imperial and problematic volume of *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain.*, covering 1914-2000 and now at an advanced planning stage, the Institute has been engaged in seminars and conferences involving professional colleagues from across the book and media trade itself, as well as academics.

## II

I suggest that, as part of the forward agenda of the School of Advanced Study the effective management of the history of the book, in graduate teaching as well as in advanced research,

now requires active, continuing negotiation between the Institute of English Studies and not only the Institutes for Commonwealth Studies and the Study of the Americas, but also the Institutes and centres concerned with other text-based cultural empires (and their book-history complexes) - Classical, Mediaeval, Modern European (Spanish, French, German), and - taking us into the great 'hybrid' empires - South and South East Asia, and Southern Africa. Already, we are formulating proposals, with the Institute of Classical Studies, for a joint MA course on the History of the Book in the Ancient World.

Further, mobilising the necessary interpretative as well as technical expertise will require extramural as well as intramural partnerships, for example with the School of Oriental and African Studies, the School of History of Art, Film and Visual Media at Birkbeck College, the Centre for Textual Scholarship at De Montfort University, the British Library, the Open University (now the base for the Reading Experience Database); and also research institutes abroad, such as Professor Sukanta Chaudhuri's School of Cultural Texts and Records at Jadavpur University Kolkata. We shall be discussing with Professor Chaudhuri, Graham Shaw of the British Library (and author of the chapter in the Festschrift on the Library's pre-eminent South Asian Collections), and with Francesca Orsini of SOAS the prospects for the history of the book and culture in India and Southern Africa, as part of the new 'Southern Hemisphere' research axis.

At the same time, the history of the book is a matter not only of the production of texts, but also of their 'archival collecting' (in Sarah Tyacke's phrase), and their intellectual control, by research libraries - the subject of Richard Landon's, Terry Belanger's, and Wallace Kirsop's chapters. Underpinned by Alston's Library History Database (also now donated to our Institute), the history of libraries and scholarship is a matter to be pursued with the Institute of Historical Research, the Warburg, and with the School of Library and Information Science at University College.

Yet, and finally, to ensure in the longer term effective morale, and to justify claims on resources, for all these negotiations, partnerships, and their resulting projects, will require

formal recognition of the indispensable, if not central, role of the history of the book within the humanities as a whole. This is foreshadowed in Professor Eliot's chapter in the Festschrift and in the essays on the general dynamics of the textual archive by Sarah Tyacke and Bernhard Fabian.. The ultimate authenticating body in this respect is the International Committee for the Historical Sciences; and it is expected that the Institute of English Studies will be invited to help prepare the case for recognition of the history of the book as a now established field of study, to be submitted at the next quinquennial meeting of the Committee in Amsterdam in 2010. Given the mandate of the School this we should do.

Dean and Directors, Ladies and Gentlemen

I fear I have, however briefly, in the immortal words of Hoagy Carmichael 'spoken a book'.

I think the best thing we can now do is to resume the relaxed informalities of the Reception.

Again, thank you all for coming.